

Abe strikes a delicate balance in Australia

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Today, Japan finds itself in a remarkably difficult diplomatic and domestic political situation. While Japan continues to be secure from any existing external threat, the rise of a nuclear North Korea and an increasingly powerful and assertive China are creating major challenges for Japanese security policy.

A serious issue is the stand-off with China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. For the first time in the history of the US–Japan alliance, it is Washington — not Tokyo — that is worried it might be dragged into a conflict in which it has no concrete interests. Tokyo must deter China from escalating the confrontation, while also reassuring the United States (and other countries Japan hopes to cooperate with on security affairs) that it is a reliable partner.



In addition to these diplomatic issues, domestically, Japan is beset by a host of social and economic problems which have been exacerbated over the past two decades by a political system that is prone to paralysis.

For conservative politicians such as Japan's prime minister, Shinzo Abe, one of the root causes of Japan's current difficulties is a loss of self-confidence. They see restoring Japan's 'confidence' as vital to getting the country back on track. Much like Ronald Reagan when he famously declared 'its morning in America', Abe wants to convince Japan — and the world — that 'Japan is back'. From Abe's perspective, this requires the promotion of a healthy sense of patriotism, which is free from both the psychological baggage of Japan's pre-1945 past and

the [institutional restrictions](#) ^[1] that were imposed on Japan in the post-war period. First among these restrictions is the American imposed Japanese constitution and in particular its [pacifist clause, Article 9](#) ^[2]. This central tenet of modern Japanese conservatism is widely believed by Abe's supporters in the Liberal Democratic Party and, by all indications, Abe himself.

Unfortunately for Abe, his desire to boost 'healthy' Japanese patriotism creates problems for other parts of his political program. Many Japanese — including his coalition partner, the Buddhist influenced New Komeito Party — are uneasy with his nationalism, fearing that it may undermine Japanese democracy and pave the path to war. Many of Abe's foreign security partners, including many pro-alliance Americans, are worried that Abe's nationalism [needlessly provokes Japan's neighbours](#) ^[3] and raises questions about Abe's ultimate reliability.

Abe has to strike a difficult balance between promoting his brand of conservative nationalism without alarming or unsettling those who do not share his views. This is no easy task. But it is one that Abe is bravely tackling, as reflected by his speech to the Australian parliament on 8 July.

Abe seized the bull by the horns by addressing the issue of Japan's troubled wartime history. Abe emphasised how young Australians suffered during World War II and stressed that post-war Japan wishes to never again allow such terrible events to happen.

Although Abe did not indicate that Japan was responsible for those horrors, by addressing the terrible death marches of Australian prisoners at Sandakan and the battle of Kokoda (where Japanese forces were reduced to cannibalism) Abe implied that both sides suffered and should forgive each other.

This point was reinforced when Abe spoke movingly about the mother of a Japanese sailor who had died aboard a submarine sunk in Sydney Bay. In 1968 the Australian government invited the sailor's mother to a commemoration ceremony. Abe praised the courage of the young sailor while getting his main message across — quoting former Australian prime minister Menzies, Abe said 'hostility to Japan must go. It is better to hope than always to remember'.

Following his discussion of history, Abe proceeded to address the common interests that unite Australia and Japan. He wisely began with common commercial interests and the Economic Partnership Agreement. Abe also stressed his continued support for the Trans-Pacific Partnership and for the much broader Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific initiatives, which would include China. Abe linked this ambitious trade agenda to Japan's internal economic and social reforms, including the promotion of female participation in the work force as part of the [so-called 'womenomics' agenda](#) ^[4].

Abe then moved to the area of enhanced security cooperation, arguably the most novel part of Japan's new diplomatic agenda. While acknowledging the common values of peace, democracy and human rights, the main emphasis of Abe's remarks on security was Australia and Japan's shared commitment to the rule of law and open seas and skies. This, of course, was an oblique criticism of China's recent assertive stance on [territorial issues in the South and East China Seas](#) ^[5]. As such it may be speculated that countering China's maritime thrust is the

central objective of Australia–Japan security cooperation, though Abe did not directly refer to China.

In all, Abe's speech was a skilful performance. But it was also one that reflects the tensions and contradictions that beset Abe's ambitious program. Whether it will be possible for Abe to maintain this delicate balance remains to be seen.

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[1] institutional restrictions:

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[2] pacifist clause, Article 9:

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[3] needlessly provokes Japan's
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[4] so-called 'womenomics'

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[5] territorial issues in the South and East China Seas:

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